



United States Mission to the OSCE

Security Dialogue - Security and Environment Nexus

As delivered by Dr. Rowena Watson, Division Chief, Office of Conservation and Water in the Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs, U.S. Department of State to the 88th Joint Meeting of the Forum for Security Co-operation and the Permanent Council, Vienna, July 12, 2023

Thanks for that introduction and for the very extensive introduction -- It's really nice to be here today with you here in Vienna, and, as mentioned, we have an OES bureau within the State Department itself. So not just our environment ministries, but we take these issues very seriously. And so it's really a pleasure to be a part of this panel.

First of all, I want to note the recent OSCE visit by one of our most senior officials, Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry, who really brought additional attention about the critical importance of addressing the nexus of environment, climate and security.

There are many areas where environment and security directly intersect, and there is increasing awareness and expertise to tackle these challenges, many of which have already been mentioned, including illegal deforestation, land degradation, soil pollution, air pollution and dissemination of wildlife populations, among many others. And as also mentioned, some environmental damage cannot be repaired.

Likewise, some damage or pillaging of nature cannot be replaced, or in many cases, at great economic and environmental cost. Environmental and water security is under increasing threat worldwide, facing stressors that range from poor resource management to accelerating climate change to the weaponization of water access during conflict.

Although precise effects vary across regions, water insecurity is becoming increasingly widespread, and a UCLA study in 2022 estimates that almost half of the world's population will suffer severe water stress by 2030. In particular, for those who live in areas of conflict, lack of access to water is even more damaging. Aggravating human displacement, which can also drive gender-based violence. Maintaining and conserving natural environments and intact ecosystem services which provide clean air, clean soils and support food security are critical for human health and survival.

Unfortunately, we are learning from early estimates that degradation of land and soils due to Russia's full scale invasion of Ukraine threatens to poison millions of hectares of soil and could contribute to roughly a 30% drop in Ukraine's agricultural production, based on data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. This is negatively impacting Ukraine's agricultural export capacity, with direct consequences for food security worldwide.

The process to convert damaged land to its former productive use through removal of contaminants and demining is very expensive and a time consuming process requiring years for soil recovery. This is just one example of land degradation. Ukraine's biodiversity and

protected areas have significant negative impacts from the Russian invasion, affecting hundreds of wild species of plants and animals. Degradation of these forested habitats also exacerbates climate change and makes those lands more vulnerable to fires.

I want to give a special focus to addressing the climate crisis and applaud the landmark OSCE Ministerial Council Decision on Climate Change adopted in December 2021. We see several ambitious opportunities for OSCE engagement in securing environmental security and the fight against the negative impacts of climate change. The OSCE's swift implementation of the specific provisions of this critical decision would be complementary and important to the global efforts towards environmental security and combating climate change. And this can build on the organization's comparative advantage in security issues and its long experience with promoting transboundary cooperation, including addressing environmental issues. In particular, we consider it essential to properly carry out the decisions provisions in a few areas that I'll cite.

First, develop and utilize climate-related early warning mechanisms to develop new pathways for transboundary cooperation among OSCE participating States at their request.

Second, use climate related data analysis to assist decision makers and stakeholders to build greater resilience against climate related threats.

Third, integrate environmental and climate considerations INTO international and domestic strategies. And finally, this will provide increased cooperation regarding the increased use of clean and renewable energy resources, including related research and investment.

Additionally, there are cross-cutting areas where OSCE members can have a positive impact. For example, to identify and raise awareness of environmental and climate-related challenges and how they affect various populations, including racial and ethnic minorities, disabled persons, the elderly and urban rural populations.

The economic and environmental destruction from Russia's unprovoked war against Ukraine and the massive cost of reconstruction now estimated by the World Bank and UN at over \$400 billion, speaks volumes about Moscow's continuing contempt for the principles and values of this organization. The destruction of Ukraine's Nova Kakhovka Dam - another tragic outcome of Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine - triggered massive flooding, causing the evacuation of thousands of Ukrainian civilians and puts many thousands more at risk.

Such challenges we are collectively facing in the OSCE region deserve our attention and discussion aimed at effective action. The OSCE must also acknowledge and address the wide ranging consequences for all of us. For all of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, including the consequences of the destruction of the dam.

In this regard, we welcome the OSCE's June 8th offer to support Ukraine in assessing and addressing the consequences of the destruction of the Nova Kakhovka dam. The OSCE's flagship extra-budgetary project on addressing the security risks from climate change, and a new project on bolstering resilience of critical energy infrastructure are important steps in this direction. The United States has supported both projects to identify climate security hotspots

in the OSCE area and developing transboundary solutions to address them and improve resilience in critical energy infrastructure.

Lastly, I want to stress the importance of transboundary cooperation with all stakeholders as essential to this process, including central and local governments and civil society.

Many thanks to our OSCE Secretariat and participating State organizers and colleagues for giving me the opportunity to join this important discussion.

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